

## I. Quotes:

A. If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties. Francis Bacon

## II. Worship Transition:

A. In the opening verses of Psalm 73 the writer doubts. He says: Surely I have<sup>1</sup> cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued and chastened every morning. If you read through the whole Psalm you know that he goes on for a while with his frustrations and doubts. The question he's asking is, "God, if you are good, then why aren't you showing up?"

B. I've been there. Perhaps you are there. If you are familiar with Psalm 73 you know that by the end he has been reminded of God's goodness and faithfulness, and he is encouraged by the promises that things will end well.

C. If you have doubts, it's good to be here today – worship is one anecdote to doubt. "Heavenly Father, meet with us this morning, draw us to yourself, remind us of your goodness, your love for us and your strength. Forgive us for our doubts and be a source of sure comfort to those who are struggling with doubt."

## III. Intro

A. As I have shared before, I joined the church so that I could stop attending. That may not sound like it makes any sense, but it made perfect sense at the time. My family attended church almost every week. I disliked it, got nothing out of it and wanted nothing to do with it.

1. In hindsight – part of the reason is because it was missing the main point. It was all Law and no Gospel. That is to say, all I heard about was that I needed to be good and kind and that God was watching. I heard nothing of Christ's death for me. I heard nothing about forgiveness of sin. Nothing about grace.

2. In fairness to them, perhaps that was there, and I was missing it. I know that people often do not hear what is being said. I don't think so.

B. But I digress. The point is, I disliked church, but my Dad said I had to go until I joined – then his work was done, and I was on my own. So, I signed up for the membership class. And I went through it – and in my defense, I told them about my doubts, but they let me in.

C. Obviously, at some point I heard the Gospel and took a different course. But, to be clear, doubt has always been a part of my story. I do believe – I am persuaded by Jesus. I am persuaded by his life and resurrection. I am persuaded by history and by philosophy and on top of all that, I have a sense of God's presence and goodness that seems to be exactly what is described in Romans 1 (among other places). I do believe. And I am basing my life on that belief.

D. But belief did not come easily and after I finally decided to opt in, I still had lots of questions, and some questions are probably more accurately called doubts.

E. For a while I thought that all of my doubts would go away. I was impressed with those who seemed to find faith easy, who were certain about everything. For them, trusting God is easy. I expected to move down that path. And I have. Over time I have grown more settled in my convictions. And some of my doubts have gone away. But not all of them.<sup>1</sup>

F. And I later came to understand that not all of them would. Some doubt would remain because of how I was wired., and some because we live in a broken world - where we see “as through a glass dimly.”<sup>2</sup> And I also came to understand that that was OK. Maybe even to be expected. That as long as I managed my doubts well – and honestly - that doubt was not a sin.

G. And then, sometime later, after becoming a pastor – especially a college pastor – I realized I was going to need to help others navigate doubt.

IV. I am sharing all of this today because in our study of the Psalms we are looking at Psalm 73, which is about doubt – that DMZ between faith and unbelief.<sup>3</sup>

V. As we turn there, I want you to understand a few things.

A. First, I want you to understand that doubt is fairly common.

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<sup>1</sup> While I am being autobiographical, let me add a bit more context. I have never suffered through a Dark Night of the Soul. I have a skeptical bent and I have needed to learn to manage that, but I worked through that and placed my faith in Christ and have no regrets about that. The more I read about him, spend time with him, study his life and work, the more amazed I grow. My faith is strong even as I continue to have questions. All of that aside, I’ve never struggled through a particularly harsh “season of doubt” or “Dark Night of the Soul.” But I know people who have. David Weil spoke about his experience of doubting just about everything shortly after his Mom died. He had been to seminary and been serving as a pastor and suddenly the heavens went dark. God was silent and He wondered – have I bought a bill of goods? A few years ago, he preached a sermon on that experience. I have never had that, but I have bad days and times when shake my head in confusion.

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. 13:12.

<sup>3</sup> The New Testament term for doubt - δισταζω (*distazo*) - means “to waver or hesitate.” The English word doubt comes from the Latin word *dubium* - which gives us our word *double* and is literally translated “of two minds.” My point here is that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Keller defines doubt as “a spiritual vertigo or form of dizziness that happens when our eyes give our brain something it can’t process and makes us put our foot in the wrong spot. And by the way, this is not strictly a word dealing with religious matters. In the ancient world, the word unbelief was linked to being unfaithful. To not believe in God is being unfaithful to him, just like you might be unfaithful to your spouse. // So in essence, having unbelief in God is like being adulterous to your partner, and that is how God described Israel’s relationship to Him in the Old Testament when they fell into idolatry and unbelief. (See Hosea)

1. It is in the Bible, where it's not just Thomas<sup>4</sup> who doubted, but Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Gideon, Peter, John the Baptist<sup>5</sup> and many others<sup>6</sup> - including Asaph<sup>7</sup> who wrote the Psalm we'll be looking at.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it's not unfair to suggest that a lot of the Bible deals with doubt. A lot of the Bible deals with the silence of God – which leads some to doubt. And the Gospels themselves can be viewed as little more than a story of people struggling to overcome doubt and believe.<sup>9</sup>

2. And doubt is not just common in the Bible, it's common in life. I have mentioned my experience. David Weil, who used to be one of the Executive Pastors here and is now heading up ReNew Communities – the Nonprofit we started that is focusing on housing and job creation - has a story in which he went into an extended period of doubt. The diaries of Mother Teresa and Charles Spurgeon – among others – show them wrestling with doubt.<sup>10</sup>

B. The second thing I want you to know is that it's not just a big topic, it's a complicated topic.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas – or doubting Thomas – is Exhibit A. He was one of the disciples. And about all he is remembered for is saying to the others, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

<sup>5</sup> John the Baptist is another. He was a remarkable and courageous prophet. Jesus said he was the greatest man who ever lived. In John 1:29 we read about him delivering one of the most significant prophecies about Christ we have. When Jesus approached John to be baptized, John said: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." John is an important man of great faith. And yet, in Matthew 11, while he is languishing in the royal prison – just about to be killed – he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one? Or should we be waiting for another?"

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 11 makes it clear that there is a lot of doubt among those celebrated for faith.

<sup>7</sup> Asaph's biograph is found in I Chronicles 15 & 16. He was appointed by David to be a musician / worship leader.

<sup>8</sup> You may be familiar with the passage where the dad who was asking Jesus to heal his son said, "**I believe, help my unbelief.**" It's a lot of other passages, such as Matthew 28:17, the verse that sets up the Great Commission. After the resurrection and just before Jesus gives them marching orders and then ascends into heaven, we read: Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. **When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.** (Some suggest that this passage might best be translated, "when they saw him they worshipped him, but were not sure.")

<sup>9</sup> See, Ed. Cyzewski, "Jesus Preached to Doubters - Preached to Doubters – You Can, Too." He notes that when Jesus called the disciples, none of them believed. And that as you read on you see them struggling to believe: in God's mercy, in forgiveness, in the miracles, how Jesus was the Bread of Life, in the need to love our enemies, etc. In the end, faith wins. But there is a lot of doubt.

<sup>10</sup> According to Daniel Cox ("Doubting Disbelievers: A New Approach to Measuring Religious Uncertainty,"), most Americans believe in God but doubts are more common than is often reported. 46% of the public expresses some amount of uncertainty about the existence of God.

1. People doubt different things - some doubt that God exists; others believe in God but doubt that He is good, or that He loves them.
2. And people also doubt in different ways. Some struggle intellectually – I tend to think doubt masquerades as more intellectual than it is. And that some people use intellectual doubt as a smoke screen (an excuse for sin). But some is intellectual, while some is more emotional – more heart than head.<sup>11</sup>
3. All of which means, you have to listen carefully to know what someone means when they use the word doubt.

C. You need to understand that there is a difference between doubting and not understanding.

1. There are lots of things I do not understand. I do not understand how my cell phone works. I do not understand how a brown cow eats green grass and makes white milk. I do not understand the nature of God. Some of these things I might be able to understand if I tried. But some – such as the nature of God – are beyond me. The finite cannot comprehend the infinite. The point being, we can believe and be committed to things without understanding them. Doubt tends to mess with commitment.

D. A fourth thing you need to understand (that many do not) is that every worldview is subject to doubt because every worldview is based on principles accepted by faith.

1. Most people understand that the Christian faith requires faith. I am not suggesting that we need to take an irrational leap into the dark. The evidence for Christ is solid. There is enough evidence to persuade anyone who is open to believe.<sup>12</sup> But nobody can prove Christianity with total certainty.
2. It turns out, every other worldview requires a faith commitment as well. We cannot technically prove much.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> When confronted with the suffering and pain of others – especially children – I find myself wondering why God doesn't show up a bit more often. But mostly I have found myself increasingly content to let God be God, express my frustration and move on.

<sup>12</sup> All outlooks on life, all theories of the meaning of human existence, rest upon faith, in that they cannot be proved with absolute certainty. But this doesn't mean that they're all equally probable or plausible! Let's take three theories of the significance of Jesus to illustrate this point: 1) We have been redeemed from sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: 2) Jesus and his disciples were actually the advance guard of a Martian invasion force, who mistook earth for the planet Venus on account of a navigation error: 3) Jesus was not really a person, but was really a hallucinogenic mushroom. Although none of these can be proved or disproved with absolute certainty, it will be obvious that they cannot all be taken with quite the same degree of seriousness!

<sup>13</sup> This might surprise you, because many people are certain about a lot of things. Just listen to talk radio. Many people are positive that their views on this, that or the other are absolutely true and plainly obvious to anyone who would open their eyes. But they are not. And so we tend to live and operate in the realm of probabilities. It turns out that there are relatively few fields where things are technically proven. And for the most part, the things we can prove are not that interesting or important. Some of this is because of our standards for proof, which have been affected by the Enlightenment, are pretty high. We end up with people wanting to use science and math level proofs on historical, philosophical and moral discussion. (It's at this point that I could pivot and start talking about the Enlightenment and how it was – in many

3. We can prove  $2 + 2 = 4$ . We can prove that water is made of 2 parts hydrogen and one-part oxygen, but we cannot prove that human rights are a good idea.<sup>14</sup> We cannot prove that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. I cannot prove that Sheri will not try to poison me at dinner tonight.

4. A lot of people say, “I can only believe in something if it can be rationally or empirically proven.” Really, because that statement itself cannot be rationally or empirically proven. That very statement is a statement of faith.<sup>15</sup>

5. There will always be an element of doubt in any statement which goes beyond the world of logic and self-evident propositions. Christianity shares this situation. It is not unique in this respect: an atheist or Marxist is confronted with precisely the same dilemma. Anyone who wants to talk about the meaning of life has to make statements which rest on faith, not absolute certainty.

6. There is great evidence for Christianity. We can have great confidence because of the reliability of its historical foundations, its internal consistency, its rationality, its power to convert, and its relevance to human existence.<sup>16</sup>

7. Lots of scientists and philosophers are coming to faith. When I was in college the big bad atheist traveling around debating everyone was Anthony Flew. He died not long ago. Before he died he became a theist – based on the evidence from science.

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ways – a quest for certainty. The Enlightenment is often thought of as a movement that undermined faith. But that was not the initial goal. The ethos was “dare to know.” Enlightenment thinkers wanted to know for sure. They were actually against religious pluralism because it had led to so many horrific wars. and wanted to get to certitude. Science was new and was providing some clarity. They thought they might get to consensus on what was ultimately true. Like every Miss American contestant, they wanted “World Peace,” and they were hoping that since faith alone wasn’t getting them there, perhaps reason would).

<sup>14</sup> Hey, people are convinced that all humans have value. Thomas Jefferson said, “We hold these things to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” But guess what, it’s not self-evident at all. And in fact, the opposite seems to be true. We cannot prove that humans have worth. That assumption is based on a Judeo-Christian frame of mind.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Keller – in *The Faith to Doubt Christianity* – writes, “This verification principle” cannot actually be proven rationally or empirically, making it an assertion or a claim, not an argument. Furthermore, there are all sorts of things you can’t prove rationally or empirically. You can’t prove to me that you’re not really a butterfly dreaming you’re a person. (Haven’t you seen *The Matrix*?) You can’t prove most of the things you believe, so at least recognize that you have faith.”

<sup>16</sup> As C. S. Lewis stressed in *Mere Christianity*, Christianity has exceptionally fine credentials on all counts. Look into them. You can totally commit yourself to the gospel in full confidence, as a powerful, credible and profoundly satisfying answer to the mystery of human existence. Faith is basically the resolve to live our lives on the assumption that certain things are true and trustworthy, in the confident assurance that they are true and trustworthy, and that one day we shall know with absolute certainty that they are true and trustworthy.

8. The fact is, we are never going to have perfect insight – we are going to have to make a decision short of being certain. And that is part of the reason we call it faith. The Christian faith requires faith.<sup>17, 18</sup>.

9. We live in a time and a place where the burden of proof for atheism is thought to be lower than that for a Christian. No true. Let the record show, no one can prove atheism either. Doubt is not just an issue for Christians.<sup>19, 20</sup> In this setting atheists and other skeptics are often thought to be smarter and more honest than those who believe.<sup>21, 22</sup> No. Not true.

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<sup>17</sup> In an interview in American – Sept 2013 - Pope Francis said, “If someone has the answer to all of the questions, that is proof that God is not with him.” He says this arguing that we must always leave room for the Lord, and the great leaders of faith always leave room for uncertainty. Christian Century, Oct. 16, 2013, p. 8

<sup>18</sup> To believe in God – or to not believe in him - demands an act of faith. Neither is based upon absolute certainty, nor can they be. To accept Jesus demands a leap of faith—but so does the decision to reject him. To accept Christianity demands faith—and so does the decision to reject it. Both rest upon faith, in that nobody can prove with absolute certainty that Jesus is the Son of God, the risen savior of humanity—just as nobody can prove with absolute certainty that he is not. The decision, whatever it may be, rests upon faith. There is an element of doubt in each case. Every attitude to Jesus—except the decision not to have any attitude at all!—rests upon faith, not certainty. These points are reflected in the American writer Sheldon Vanauken’s account of his mental wrestling before his conversion at Oxford. He found himself caught in a dilemma over the role of proof in faith, which many others have experienced. “There is a gap between the probable and the proved. How was I to cross it? If I were to stake my whole life on the risen Christ, I wanted proof. I wanted certainty. I wanted to see him eat a bit of fish. I wanted letters of fire across the sky. I got none of these ... It was a question of whether I was to accept him—or reject him. My God! There was a gap behind me as well! Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble—but what of the leap to rejection? There might be no certainty that Christ was God—but, by God, there was no certainty that he was not. This was not to be borne. I could not reject Jesus. There was only one thing to do once I had seen the gap behind me. I turned away from it, and flung myself over the gap towards Jesus.”

<sup>19</sup> It’s not uncommon for people to say that we are living in an age of doubt. I wouldn’t say that. Yes, we’ve moved past the time in the West when most people articulated faith in the God of the Bible. But I am going to argue that many people who doubt God have faith in their worldview. And many are absolutely certain that they are right. For a while we lived in an era of relativism – but not so much anymore. There was a day when a failure to land on a philosophy of life was seen as weakness not strength. That is not what is in place today. ?? There is a lot of doubt out there. And it enjoys a privileged position. It’s got some cache – it enjoys some prestige.

<sup>20</sup> At the moment, doubt of religious faith – in particular, doubt of the Christian faith - enjoys a privileged status. So many do not think that an atheist has faith. They think an atheist has facts and reason. Atheism and doubt enjoy a privileged position.

<sup>21</sup> Dallas Willard noted that skepticism is no guarantee of intellectual prowess.

<sup>22</sup> It’s not uncommon for me to hear someone say, “I’d believe if only the kinds of things happening in the Bible were happening today. “I’m not sure that is true. It didn’t seem to work then. 1) In John 11, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, but instead of believing he was God, the authorities took it as a sure sign that they should oppose him 2) in Joshua 7 we read about the lack of belief in Ai right after the big

10. To understand doubt, we need to understand that it's not just religious claims that can be – and in some cases should be - doubted. In the end, everything requires faith.

11. Alister McGrath – the brilliant Oxford professor who has three PhD's from Oxford – one in molecular bio-physics, one in historical theology and one in intellectual history, said that while finishing his PhD in molecular biophysics, he discovered the Christianity was far more intellectually robust than he ever imagined. And was drawn in. And as soon as he finished his PhD he realized that he was going to “trade one faith for another.”

a) I met him and tried to talk with him – he is too smart to have a conversation with.

b) Here is a quote: Christians tend to think that doubt is a problem for them alone. But it's not. It's a problem for any worldview—whether Jewish or Islamic, atheist or religious. Appreciating this point is essential to seeing doubt in its proper perspective. Most people—including, it has to be said, many atheists themselves! — have the rather simple idea that atheism is about fact, whereas Christianity is about faith. Their ideas are factual; those of Christians are unproven. But it's not like that. Let me explain by asking a question: can I prove with certainty that there is a God? The short answer is “no.” If you have time to study the history of the philosophical arguments for the existence of God, you'll know that they are suggestive, but not conclusive. It's pretty much the universal consensus within philosophy that rational argument does not settle the question of God's existence, one way or the other. Argument is not going to settle this question, one way or the other. And that means that the outcome is uncertain for the atheist. Now let's pause here, because you need to appreciate something important. Christians often tend to see only one side of that statement: that nobody can rationally prove that God exists. But can you see that there is another side to it? That nobody can disprove that God exists? The Christian who believes in God thus does so as a matter of faith. But can you see that the atheist has to do the same? That her belief that there is no God is exactly that—a belief! Because she cannot prove that there is no God, her atheism is also a faith.

E. There are lots of reasons for us to think about doubt. It's common. It's complicated. It's disruptive. I chose Psalm 73 for these reasons, and also because I want you to know that it is not a sin to have doubts – and that it is safe to talk about doubts here – but you need to learn to manage them.

1. In some churches doubt is a taboo topic. Early in my life as a Christ-follower I learned not to express doubt around certain people because it freaked them out or it got me labeled as a troublemaker.

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miracle at Jericho. And part of what we see – versus 2-5) is that Joshua himself is among those who panic.

2. I chose this Psalm because I want you to know that you do not need to be scared of your doubts. Some people are scared to doubt because they think that if they take a hard look, everything will collapse.<sup>23</sup> That has never been my experience.

3. By the way, when people went to Jesus with honest doubts, he dealt with them kindly. He called on them to believe – he suggested that they needed to take a step, put their weight down. But he also showed him his hands, which is what Thomas said he needed to see. It wasn't a sin for him to doubt. This isn't my idea. Jude 1:22 says, "**be merciful to those who doubt.**"

4. I choose a Psalm 73 because I know some of you are struggling with doubt right now. I have chosen Psalm 73 because I know that many of you will face doubt in the future. I have chosen Psalm 73 because it models the way forward – not to deny our doubts, to be proud of them or to deify them, but to pray them. And I have chosen Psalm 73 because I want those of you who are waiting to get all of your questions answered before you commit to know<sup>24</sup> – you can bring your doubts with you as you come to faith. Asaph – the writer of Psalm 73 does.

F. So, let's turn there.

#### VI. Let's walk through Psalm 73

**A. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.** We see that:

1. Asaph doesn't doubt that God exists, he doubts that God loves him.

2. We also see that he is in a precarious spot. You do not talk about a foothold if you are on level ground. You don't say, "I lost my foothold." You say, "I tripped," or "I stubbed my toe." You get the idea that he is rock climbing, it's quite risky and he almost fell. He is in a scary spot.

B. Then, beginning in verse 3 and going down to verse 12, we find him describing what he imagines to be true of arrogant – the wicked. **This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.**

C. V13: **Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.**

D. In the first half of this Psalm, Asaph doubts that God is for him and he doubts that his efforts to follow God matter. And then – V15 – he pivots. The fever breaks. The first 14 verses have been full of his despair. The next 14 report on his renewed hope. **If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply until I entered the sanctuary of God;**

<sup>23</sup> It takes faith to doubt. George MacDonald wrote: The man that feareth, Lord, to doubt, in that fear, doubteth thee."

<sup>24</sup> William Rainey once asked, "Why didn't somebody ever tell me that I could become a Christian and work on all my doubt afterward?"

**E.** And then he reframes things in light of eternity. V18: **Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!**

**F.** V21: **When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.** As ultimate reality comes into focus, he realizes how spiritually sick he had been – how off his view was. He has thought he was an innocent sufferer who was getting nothing but abuse and deprivation in spite of his righteousness. He is realizing his view was being shaped by bitterness and ignorance. And as we go into verse 23, he notes that he has been a blessed man enjoying God’s grace and goodness.

**G.** V23: **Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.**

**H.** **My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.**

VII. There are four things I want to be sure you see.

VIII. First, we should Expect Doubt

**A.** We should expect seasons of spiritual dryness and doubt. They are commonly reported in the Bible. And God gives us prayers to pray when we doubt.

**B.** We should expect that God is going to do things we cannot understand – which may lead us to some kind of doubt.<sup>25</sup>

**C.** And let me be clear, I am talking about things that may hit us with more force than we expect. During the 1940s, C.S. Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain*, his answer to why an all-good and all-powerful God would allow suffering. If you have read it, you know that it’s just a bit too neat and tidy. It had some great lines, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” OK, good, yes, but it’s a bit removed from the pain.

**D.** Two decades later, after his wife dies of cancer, he writes, *A Grief Observed*. And if you read that book, you know that God didn’t just rouse Lewis, he nearly shattered him. Lewis talks about going to God in desperate need - when all other help is vain. He writes of crying out to God and discovering, “a door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. And after that, silence.”

**E.** He had already gained some global fame for *Mere Christianity* and *Screwtape Letters* at the time, so he publishes this book under another name. And his friends kept giving it to him because he was so devastated by Joy’s death. He finally admitted that he had written it.

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<sup>25</sup> We need to adopt a position of humility – i.e., we need to understand that just because we cannot answer a question doesn’t mean it doesn’t have an answer, or just because we cannot see what God is doing means it will not later be shown to be wonderful and beautiful.

F. For the record, Lewis said that in his case he wasn't in danger of not believing in God. "The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, 'So there is no God after all,' but 'So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"

G. Point one – you should expect some seasons of doubt.

IX. Point Two: We need to Understand Doubt.

A. In particular, we need to understand that doubt it is often more of a spiritual issue than an intellectual one. Those are fighting words for some people. I base them on a few things:

1. My experience as a college pastor, where I heard few real questions but a lot of some smoke screen objections – can God make a rock so big he can't lift it? Really, that's your question? If I answer it, you'll come to faith?

2. What Paul tells us in Romans 1:19. There we learn that the reality of God is plain to people – he has written it on our hearts and shown us his glory in the skies – but some choose to suppress the truth because of sin. Why? Why suppress the idea that there is a God? Well, knowing that there is a holy God who knows everything about us and who makes demands about what we think, do and say is inconvenient to say the least.<sup>26</sup> As a college pastor it sure seemed like a lot of young people started to express doubts about the same time they started to sleep around. Faith is now very inconvenient.

3. I base my claim that doubt is often more spiritual or emotional than intellectual on what Asaph says in verse 3: "I envied the arrogant." He is dealing with some strong and unpleasant emotions.

B. In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis's fictional account of a bus load of people from hell who travel to the outskirts of heaven to meet old friends who want them to repent and join them in heaven, he stages a conversation between two academics. The one from heaven, who apparently had been an atheist for a while, says to the other, "one of the reasons you are in hell is because you do not believe." The ghost from hell says, "that's ridiculous. Those are just my honest opinions. Why should I be punished for those?" And then the academic from heaven says, "Let's be honest, our opinions were not completely honest. We wanted certain things to be true. We wanted to court favor with certain people and groups."

C. Here's the point, our doubts are seldom purely intellectual. They may have some merit that way, but it's unlikely that Asaph would have been frustrated by the prosperity of the wicked if he was prospering as well. This was as much about his heart as it was injustice. If we deconstruct our doubts, we may find honest aspects to them, but we will almost certainly also find selfishness and pride and sin.

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<sup>26</sup> John Ortberg talks about this in his book on doubt. He notes that: 1) according to modern psychology, we are not machines. We are not brains on a stick. Our thoughts are tied to feelings and desires. In fact, our heart is more likely to shape our mind than our mind is to shape our heart; we do not think our way to what we should want, we want our way to what we think; and 2) he then talks about the fact that some people want to believe in God and so they are more likely to do so.

## X. Three: We need to Play Offense.

A. We need to play defense: we need to put on the armor of God.<sup>27</sup> And we need to brush up on apologetics from time to time.<sup>28</sup> I think apologetics value is often more for Christians than for non-Christians. We need to prepare to be attacked and to learn how not to feed our doubts. To not obsess over our doubts.<sup>29</sup> We need to play defense.

B. But we also need to play offense. What does that look like? Verse 17: I was in danger “**until I came into the sanctuary of God.**” Asaph keeps doing the right things. He is not passive. If you are struggling with doubt – especially if you are struggling with doubt – you need to spend time with other Christians – who can often loan you some faith. And you need to keep up your spiritual disciplines – prayer and Bible reading. God can handle your anger and confusion. Keep the lines of communication open. When in doubt, keep talking to God.<sup>30</sup>

C. And you need to Doubt your Doubts.<sup>31</sup>

D. We need to be consistent. If we are going to doubt our faith, we need to doubt our doubts.

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<sup>27</sup> There are a number of things that can lead to doubt – that weaken our faith: hypocrisy in the church, personal sin, someone else turning away from faith; wrong assumptions about the Christian life. All of these can feel like a kick in the stomach. But we are in a spiritual battle. One of the biggest sources of doubt is spiritual attack. If you have not read Screwtape Letters, or done so lately, you should.

<sup>28</sup> On a few occasions where I have been troubled by something I have done a full court press. Rather than try to ignore my doubts I have really gone after them. Take one and work it through. Read, study, go after it. And I am quite certain you will gain confidence and your faith finds greater footing. In addition to general apologetics, there are a number of books about Doubt: 1) Know Doubt, John Ortberg; 2) Reason for God: Belief in Age of Skepticism, Tim Keller; 3) Room for Doubt in Reaching for the Invisible God; and 4) God in the Dark, Os Guinness.

<sup>29</sup> Thanks to Alister McGrath for this analogy.

<sup>30</sup> Another way to say this: keep playing offense. Keep reading the Bible, keep coming to church. Keep worshiping, praying, serving, going to small group and reading the Bible. Psalm 73:16 reads: when I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me until I entered the sanctuary of God. Keep marching ahead. My experience is that one of the things that comes out of this is the ability to look around and see others who have worked through these issues themselves. To draw strength from others. Do not try to go it alone. When your faith is weak you need to seek God, play offense, stay close to your friends.// Keller argues that Psalm 73:15 suggests that Asaph turned from doubt in part because of the community.

<sup>31</sup> Thanks to Keller – his sermon “Praying our Doubts” - for this point.

1. This goes back to the idea that every worldview is based on belief in the very end. We never choose between belief and non-belief. There's no such thing as non-belief. We cannot disbelieve in God without believing in something else – our opinion, our intellect, our intuition – that is not based solely on facts. We are always placing our faith somewhere.
2. And it is also based on the idea that you do not jettison a theory until you have a better one. This is a point Sheldon Van Auken stumbles into in *A Severe Mercy* – which is quite a book if you've not read it. He writes, "The position was not, as I had been comfortably thinking all these months, merely a question of whether I was to accept the Messiah or not. It was a question of whether I was to accept Him – or reject. My God! There was a gap behind me too. Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble – but what of the leap to rejection? There might be no certainty that Christ was God – but by God, there was no certainty that He was not."
3. Whatever you believe – you need faith. Whatever you believe, you need faith. Do not just examine Jesus, look at your options. Doubt your doubts.

XI. Finally, the fourth thing: pray through your doubts.

A. This is the real message of Psalm 73. The fact that this Psalm is in the Bible – a Psalm that opens with an expression of the anger and confusion (doubt), the doubts of Asaph, this godly leader who is writing Scripture - the fact that Psalm 73 is part of the Bible suggests that we not simply bury our doubts. We need to bring them to God. We should not act like we do not have them. We need to be honest with God about what is going on in our hearts. We need to adopt that third way we looked at two weeks ago.

B. The religious path is uncomfortable with doubt. Those that are religious want to act like we are better than we are so it suppresses them. It doesn't want to deal with the darkness that can be found in our heart so it tries to deny or bury or whitewash our emotions. And a more modern way which says: I have to follow them. I have to be true to who I am. My feelings rule. There is nothing else I can do. In contrast to these two options, the Psalms offer a third way – they do not deny our feelings – they are very raw (disturbingly so to many – what is that doing in the Bible?) but they do not deify our emotions either. They pray through our feelings. They process our feelings in front of God seeking his insight all the time.

XII. Doubt is a big topic. If it characterizes you, you do not need to feel guilty or panic, but you shouldn't sit still. Doubt is not unbelief, but it can lead there. Your situation is too important to be passive.

A. We need to Expect Doubt. We need to work to Understand Doubt – realize that it is often more of a heart condition than a head one. We need to Play offense – Reach for His Hand; Feed our soul, lean into Jesus, learn to doubt our doubts.

B. And finally, we need to pray our doubts.

C. There will come a time when we will no longer see as through a glass dimly, but with clarity. Right now, there is doubt. Manage them well.